

EDITORIALS

Prison crowding worse than reported

THE ISSUE *New study understates how badly Alabama prisons are overcrowded. Major reforms are needed just to bring conditions close to those of neighboring states.*

Alabama has the most crowded prisons in the South, according to a new report.

It could be worse. In fact, it is much worse — nearly double — than what the Southern Legislative Conference report indicated it is.

Out of the 16 Southern states the report ranked, Alabama's prisons rated the most crowded at 118 percent of capacity. Actually, though, that's wrong.

The report — possibly due to typos, state officials say — understated the crowded conditions. Alabama's prisons are really at 214 percent capacity, meaning there are more than twice as many inmates housed in them than the prisons were built to hold.

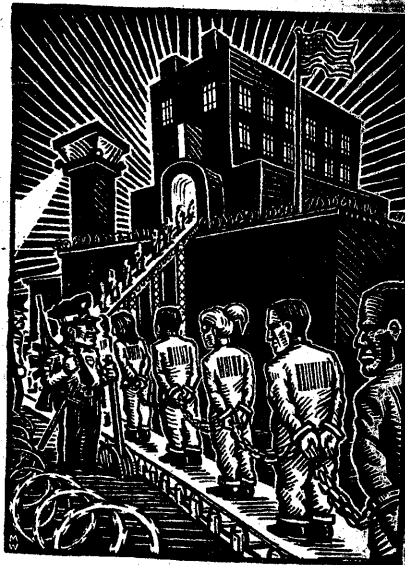
In July, Alabama had 26,496 inmates. State prisons were built for only 12,388. The SLC report, however, incorrectly said prisons were built for 22,406.

State prison officials said they planned to contact the SLC to correct their numbers.

Maybe the SLC should be forgiven for the mistake. The true numbers must look like an aberration, since they are so out of line with those of other states.

The state closest to Alabama in overcrowding, for example, is North Carolina, whose prisons operate at 112 percent of capacity. Our prisons are almost twice as crowded.

To make matters worse, Alabama also has the region's highest ratio of inmates to guards — 9.8 inmates per guard compared to the regional average of 5.5 — and spends only about half the regional average on its prisons



per inmate — \$9,516 per year compared to \$18,522. Maybe there really is something to the idea that you get what you pay for.

Is there any wonder why Alabama prison officials so often are called before state and federal judges, who find the state guilty of housing inmates in unhealthy, dangerously overcrowded conditions? Frankly, it's only because of the sanctions imposed by those courts that the state has made any gains, modest as they are, in relieving crowding.

Alabama sends too many people to prison, holds them too long and does too little to rehabilitate them so they won't return to prison. Changing those realities requires fundamental reform.

Then, maybe, we could say our prisons are only just as bad as other Southern states, rather than twice as bad.